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ABSTRACT

This paper advances the thesis that students should be trained to recognize acceptable and unacceptable performances in basic skill areas and should assume responsibility for attaining proficiency in these areas. Among the topics discussed are the value of having junior high school students check their own assignments, discover their errors, and discuss their error patterns with the teacher; the need for English teachers to involve teachers of all subjects in developing students' basic skills and in maintaining high standards for students' written work; the value of schoolwide coordination in fostering the development of proofreading skills; and the success of a summer basic skills clinic, taught by teachers from several subject areas, for incoming seventh graders who were deficient in basic skills. The teachers in the clinic guided students through exercises showing how each basic skill was used in various subject areas. (GW)

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JUNIOR HIGH STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES FOR BASIC SKILLS

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Every student has the right to become proficient in basic skills in English. Those rights should be exercised in all grade levels. If students wait until near graduation from high school to assess their proficiencies in basic skills, it may be too late. Students should demand that their teachers train them to discern levels of proficiencies in skills.

Students can exercise their rights and assume responsibilities therefor. They can be trained to recognize acceptable and unacceptable performances in skill areas. If we are to have an articulate system of basics in English, students must become more involved in sharing responsibilities for higher proficiencies in basic skills as practiced in all subjects. In all courses in elementary, junior high or middle school, secondary, and college, basic skills in language are clearly, distinctly, and precisely related one to the other.

In Montgomery County, Maryland, curricular decisions alone do not assure higher achievement in basic skills. Articulation of those decisions is important, but articulation without shared responsibilities is meaningless. Parents have voiced their concerns about low achievement scores in basic skills. Teachers have expressed concerns about the poor performances of students. Administrators and supervisors

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have designed programs that stress the importance of basic skills. And, the press has had a heyday reporting performance scores and educators' concerns. The problem, it seems to me, is that the students who are performing at low proficiency levels are little concerned about their low achievement. Students need adult guidance as they assume greater responsibilities.

How can we, as English teachers, guide students to become more responsible for better performances in basic skills? I suspect that the ways we guide junior high students would help also students on any grade level. Nevertheless, permit a focus on junior high.

OBSERVABLE INSTRUCTION

It may help us to take a look at junior high skill instruction as observed in (1) curriculum, (2) test results, and (3) visits to classes.

First, assuming that textbook publishers and curriculum specialists cooperate in the determination of skills to be taught on each grade level, we can assume also that junior high instruction in basic skills is similar throughout the United States. If this be true, neither course content nor an arbitrary continuum of basic skills prevents articulation of efforts for better performances in basic skills.

Second, looking at test results of junior high students

throughout our country, I observe similar results with slight variances being publicized. From California, Florida, and Maryland come reports that the test results show weaknesses in the basic skills.

Third, viewing actual instruction in basic skills, I observe individualized, small group, or class instruction being teacher-paced or student-paced in both open and traditional schools. I see basic skills being isolated or coordinated, taught in a variety of ways, using varied content or materials, and mastery being required. I believe that the teachers observed are well aware that instruction, drilling, and testing have not brought the kind of achievement that they desire to see in the performances of their students.

A closer look at classroom practices may reveal that conscientious teachers may have assumed too much responsibility for improved students performances in the basics. For example, in most observations that I made, teachers corrected assignments. Errors marked for students served as a basis for follow-up instruction. This teaching pattern must be reexamined. What have students gained by teachers' innumerable hours of marking assignments? Students who do their assignments are capable also of checking those assignments, of discovering their own errors, and of identifying, with the teacher's guidance, the skills they have not mastered. May I suggest a learning pattern to encourage greater student responsibility for errors.

DISCOVERY APPROACH

After a teacher has determined the skill to be taught, given introductory instruction in that skill, and provided a meaningful series of assignments, then the responsibility for learning should shift more to the students. A teacher should require each student to complete minimal assignments, discern and assess the value of those assignments, and talk with the teacher about the thoughts that led to the errors. Students should be required to discover and to explain the reasons for their errors, thus to become more responsible for their own performances in basic skills.

In the more common learning pattern observed, teachers marked the errors and returned the assignments to the students. Usually, the students saw how many errors they had made, compared their scores or grades with classmates, and either destroyed or filed the assignment in a notebook or folder. Very little, if anything, was done with the errors.

Students can learn from their errors. As students talk through their incorrect reasoning that leads to errors, the teacher will be able to determine the gaps in skill development that contribute to the errors. Skilled teachers will be able to lead students back to basic things known and forward to points where more instruction is needed.

In my seventh and eighth grade classes I have been encouraged by the insights that junior high people have in

analyzing their own errors. Often I discover that students begin to group similar errors. For example, in the study of capitalization, I have had students observe similar errors in capitalizing names of religious groups. Such students discover that the conventions of using capital letters with deity and religions become more meaningful.

SCHOOLWIDE EFFORT

In encouraging students to become more responsible, teachers of all subjects must become involved. Maintenance of basic skills must be shared by all teachers. There is little point in teaching students a basic skill in English class if students recognize that they do not need that skill in any other subject.

Isolated drill in a basic skill seldom brings sustained proficiency in that skill. Repeated exercises that become habitual in many subjects over a long period of time encourage students to become more responsible for maintaining proficiency. All teachers should see many opportunities to apply basic skills in the natural setting of each subject.

Each subject requires writing assignments. In fact, in Montgomery County we studied the curriculum guides to determine the number of writing activities suggested in the varied course guides. We discovered that more than one-third of all suggested learning experiences in all subjects called for writing. Whenever teachers assign writing, they should require students to demonstrate high standards of proficiency in the preparation of

that writing. Otherwise, such teachers become saboteurs of the basic skills program in English.

Consider the following example. A student is required to write a series of sentences in a social studies activity. The teacher accepts a series of sentence fragments and awards the student with a high grade based on the content in the fragments. The same student then questions why partial sentences do not bring the same reward in science, health education, or English.

All teachers must have greater concern for the levels of expectancy they set for each student. Teachers who require little proficiency in basic skills are sabotaging the efforts of those teachers who require higher proficiency. Whenever students see a personal need for improving their writing skills and become convinced of high teacher expectancy, they will consider more responsibly their performances in basic skills.

LEARNING TO PROOFREAD

Students need to be guided in developing proofreading skills. They need a sensitivity to their errors in all written assignments. Proofreading instruction should emphasize the types of skills needed in each subject area. Those skills that are most difficult for students, require repeated exercises or assignments.

Pride in proofreading can be stimulated. Students should be required to read back over their assignments, to verify their uses of basic skills, and make corrections, if necessary. They

need many opportunities in all subjects to prove that their performances are in accordance with certain standards or conventions. All teachers should be on the alert constantly for opportunities to encourage students to proofread responsibly.

To coordinate schoolwide proofreading efforts, an ongoing record of errors in assignments could become a very valuable, prescriptive tool. As each assignment is submitted, the student should attach a cumulative record of previous errors. This record, be it a checklist or a tally sheet, could identify for all teachers the daily needs of each student in basic skills. As the errors become fewer on succeeding assignments, naturally, students will take greater pride in improving their performances.

Whatever practices encourage greater student responsibilities for basic skills should be continued. More attention to acceptable handwriting standards may be desired. As students take greater pride in their handwriting, they take even more pride in attaining better performances in their written assignments.

Greater coordination of editing standards will enable each teacher to feel more secure and to be more realistic in setting expectancy levels of student performances. Penalties for irresponsible work need to be considered. Rather than accepting all assignments submitted, teachers should refuse illegible, carelessly-prepared work. Maybe, a "Not Acceptable" grade needs to be added to the traditional "A" to "E" scale. Shoddy workmanship needs to be discouraged in school work.

Probably the greatest incentive to greater student responsibilities for basic skills is a concentrated, schoolwide effort throughout each school day. At John T. Baker Junior High we discovered that this schoolwide effort led to skills clinics.

VOLUNTARY SKILLS CLINICS

During the summer of 1977, we piloted a basic skills clinic in our summer school offerings. Encouraged by area and county supervisory personnel, we met with teachers of sixth grades in our feeder elementary schools. We discussed the deficiencies in basic skills that our incoming seventh graders would exhibit.

Sixth grade teachers administered basic proficiency tests. The results of those tests were studied by both elementary and junior high teachers. Administrators from both elementary and junior high notified parents of the test results and a summer school opportunity for students to attend a basic skills laboratory.

The skills lab permitted any student to improve proficiency in basic skills; it encouraged each incoming seventh grader to focus on any basic skill tested as deficient. An attendance incentive was offered: students would attend only until they demonstrated 80% mastery in their deficient skills. Thereafter, attendance was voluntary. This past summer some of our students attended as few as three days; other students spent five weeks in the lab. Many students, after demonstrating mastery in their deficient skills, decided to work in basic skills that would give

them a better start in junior high classes in September. Their decisions demonstrated that students could begin to assume more responsibilities for performances in basic skills.

The skills lab was designed to include teachers from several subject areas. Each daily session began with a scheduled basic skill introduced by a specialist, either reading or media. Following that initial general instruction, students then rotated among the teachers of science, math, English, and social studies who guided students through meaningful exercises showing how that skill was used in each subject area.

Teachers noted, with much satisfaction, that students gained greater proficiencies each time the same skill was practiced in differing subject areas. As each daily session ended, students exhibited greater ease in performances and commented freely about enjoyment in their studies. Here again is proof that teachers can work together schoolwide to encourage greater student responsibilities for performances in basic skills. Better achievement not only in test scores but also in daily performances in several subjects was observed. Students took greater pride in their work.

In September 1977 we reported to a neighboring secondary school our combined elementary and junior high efforts to help high school teachers who assure state officials that students can perform basic skills. Hopefully, fewer students will need special instruction in basic skills when they reach high school. Realistically, we know that schoolwide efforts encourage students to assume more responsibilities for their learning. The high

school teachers encouraged us to share with them opportunities for the repeated exercises in each subject area to maintain proficiency in basic skills. Our county curriculum guides in basic skills, especially in reading and writing, have been cross-referenced to show how each subject area can contribute to the learning of basic skills. We illustrated from our experiences, limited though they may be, the efforts that are possible in any school when teachers work together across grade lines and subject areas.

EXERCISED RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

In any schoolwide effort, students soon demand that they be taught the skills they are required to perform. As students are encouraged to talk through their errors, proofread all written assignments, and fulfill higher expectancy levels in all subjects, they are becoming more responsible for improved performances in basic skills. Each student has the right to exercise and the responsibility to share in attaining greater achievement in basic skills.